DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 361 CS 215 208

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TITLE A Collaborative Writing Project Using the Worldwide Web.
PUB DATE 1996-02-00
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Distance Education; Gifted; Junior High Schools; Program Descriptions; Rural Education; *Story Telling; *World Wide Web; Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS *Parents and Children Together; Web Sites

ABSTRACT

A student in a distance education course, as part of a midterm project, set out to build a Web site that had written communication as its main focus. The Web site, "The Global Campfire," was modeled on the old Appalachian tradition of the "Story Tree," where a storyteller begins a story and allows group members to add to it. Gifted seventh and eighth graders at a rural Indiana school participated, although no suitable submissions were received until the Web site developer explained the purpose of the story tree in person. Extensions of this project into other content areas can provide students a forum for discussion and the motivation to improve their reading and writing abilities. The Web site was subsequently adapted for incorporation into the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication's "Parents and Children Together Online" magazine. Contributions were received from children all over the United States and all over the world. Plans include the adddition of new storylines and multiple storylines. (The introductory screen of the Global Campfire Web site and an example of one of the story trees are attached.) (RS)

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A Collaborative Writing Project Using the Worldwide Web

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A Collaborative Writing Project Using the Worldwide Web

by Allen Sylvester and Christopher Essex

Indiana University

Allen Sylvester, Education L517 student:

As I began planning for this project, I hoped to integrate the use of computers into a midterm project involving some aspect of writing instruction. From the readings I had done for this class, it seemed that there had been very little work done in the field of computer telecommunications and how it could be used to contribute to reading and writing. I began to ponder how the newest and most innovative aspects of this field could stimulate students' interest, while requiring them to exercise their reading skills at the same time. I decided to focus on a project utilizing the worldwide web, that part of the Internet that delivers text, graphics and other media to a user's computer.

One has only to watch a half-hour of television or to read any popular magazine to notice that the worldwide web has already made its way into mainstream culture. Nearly every business has an *http* address, and nearly every commercial online service (such as America Online, Prodigy and others) has its own version of a web browser for use by its clients. Storylines in the latest movies revolve around the interactions between people on the Internet, and many news items refer to the residents of 'cyberspace' as a growing subculture. In my opinion, the chance to "surf the web" ought to interest even the most computer-illiterate student.

I set out to build a web site that had written communication as its main focus. Before I could proceed, however, I needed to know the age group and interests of the users it might serve. This provided a challenge until I heard of a project being coordinated by the Gifted and Talented Education department at Indiana University. Their project, called "SPRING-2," was an effort to provide technology and innovative educational materials and instruction to rural gifted youth in southern Indiana. As part of their effort, they provided schools with computers and an internet hookup through IDEAnet, Indiana's

statewide bulletin board service. I agreed to help them with certain technical problems in exchange for using their students as subjects for my midterm project.

The students in Project SPRING were 7th and 8th graders in two southern Indiana schools. They fit the profile of what is called the "Rural Gifted." Rural Gifted youth are gifted, though they have not had the educational opportunities that their urban and suburban counterparts have had. A Rural Gifted youth might display his or her giftedness through musical or artistic ability, or through mechanical aptitude. The goal of Project SPRING was to provide these students with extra instruction to "bring them up to speed" in relation to other gifted youth. In my mind, these students were perfectly suited to my project.

I set up a website which modelled the old Appalachian tradition of the "Story Tree", where a storyteller begins a story, and allows group members to add to it, until a unique story develops over time. Since the students participating in my experiment are of Appalachian descent, I hoped that they would take to this format easily. The main obstacle I had to overcome was their lack of reading and writing ability, which is due in part to their environment and to the inequalities which exist in their school systems. The students know they do not have good grammar and spelling skills, and as such they were quite timid at first to expose their writing to review by their peers. I received an e-mail message from one student early on, expressing his misgivings about the project. Eventually, though, the students got over their initial fears.

The site operated by having the students read through the initial storyline, which I provided, a paragraph or so that set the stage for a story in a particular genre such as science fiction or mystery, and then they were invited to add their own paragraph to the story. Then the next student would add on to the story and so on. The students would therefore be asked to exercise their reading skills to comprehend the storyline as it developed, as well as analyzing what had last been said, and synthesizing a paragraph which would continue the thread of the story in a fashion which would in some way lend continuity to the story. I also emphasized, in order to provide a sense of safety for these students who, until now, had apparently never had their writing viewed by their peers, that criticism of other people's writings would not be a part of the exercise. They were just to read, and to continue the story on as best they could.

The first few weeks were frustrating. Between mechanical and software problems between the schools and my site, and the extreme reluctance of the students, I felt the project might not get off the ground. The first student who contributed misunderstood the thrust of the project, and ended the story in one paragraph. I was forced to erase his contribution, explain the concept in person, and hope for the best. I was pleasantly surprised to see the number of submissions which began to arrive shortly after my in-person explanation.

Initially, there were to be two schools participating in the story tree. However, one school was forced to drop out due to the lack of time and commitment of the participating teachers. In the other school, there was great support from the Media Specialist, who felt this was an excellent opportunity for the students to express themselves. She related to me that these are students who never find an outlet to express what they feel, yet are extremely curious about the world outside their little town. These students love the computers that SPRING donated, and spend hours browsing the worldwide web. With this sort of support, I was not surprised about the strong responses received.

It is my belief that such story trees could be used to evaluate the necessity of remediation for certain students. A good reading/writing teacher could view the submissions of a student who has real problems with certain grammatical forms, and could provide gentle remediation on those aspects of writing where the student needs help. Similarly, students who seem unable to grasp certain aspects of reading will exhibit this lack of understanding by either refusing to participate, contributing storylines which bear little relationship to the original, or by showing other non-verbal cues which an alert teacher can observe.

As a former student in schools where personal expression was limited to a few term papers and the occasional journal entry, I remember jumping at the chance to participate in a story-telling contest. This was a single-person contest where you were given the first sentence of a story and were expected to finish it. I never felt quite so free to express myself as then, and I hope that this opportunity gave the SPRING students a similar feeling. I also know that in certain situations, open sharing of stories is not easy for this age group, so perhaps an alternative would be to expound upon the idea that a submission can be made anonymously. I remember feeling a secret joy in seeing how my stories would affect other people. Perhaps a teacher who incorporated this

idea into a classroom could take some time during the week to read out loud the most recent submissions as a chance to discuss constructively the way the stories might be improved or changed slightly.

My area of concentration is computers and science. Both of these are areas in which writing and reading are often difficult to incorporate. As a computer teacher, I think that this sort of mechanism would provide an excellent opportunity to have students read and write, and even contribute to stories that were being added to by schools across the world. It would be an excellent extension of this activity to have actual well-known authors make occasional contributions, or even have professors at colleges critique the writings online, or via e-mail, so students can learn interactively. As a science teacher, I believe an extension of this same project would provide a forum for discussion of conclusions and data analysis. Students could work on a global problem, such as acid rain, and confer with fellow students at schools across the nation. They could share data, and discuss findings and conclusions, even participate in a form of "chat" through the Internet, and all the while be utilizing their reading and writing skills without consciously knowing it.

It is my belief that if the use of writing and reading is interesting enough to students, they will actively seek out improvement in their writing and reading abilities so that they will be able to participate more effectively. If they enjoy working with the World Wide Web, and understand that to communicate effectively they have to know how to read and write well, then perhaps they will find the intrinsic motivation to learn these skills in the classroom.

Christopher Essex, Distance Education Coordinator:

After discussing the above project with Dr. Carl B. Smith, director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Reading, English and Communication and Mr. Sylvester's instructor for the course, I decided that "The Global Campfire," as Mr. Sylvester had titled his online project, would be a great addition to ERIC-REC's *Parents and Children Together Online* magazine, of which I was the editor. This web-delivered magazine, an outgrowth of a popular booklet-and-audiocassette series, featured original articles and stories for children and parents. I felt that the interactive nature of this project would make it a perfect addition to the magazine's offerings on the website. I believed that children would enjoy the opportunity to flex their writing

muscles via the worldwide web, and the collaborative nature of the activity would make it an educational as well as entertaining experience for them.

Technically, adapting the project was not especially difficult. Mr. Sylvester had already written the basic text that would go on the pages. He had formatted the text in HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) so that it could be delivered via the WWW. This is a simple formatting technique, and can be accomplished by using any one of a number of HTML authoring programs, such as Microsoft's Internet Assistant, an add-on to the popular Word program, Adobe PageMill, or Hot Metal.

The pages also required the use of a forms processing program called Transform, which would take the text typed in by the student through their web browser (Netscape, Mosaic, or Lynx) and send this text, as an email message, to the person administering the web pages (in this case, myself). It would be easy to make the posting of these additions to the stories automatic, but both Mr. Sylvester and I agreed that this was not necessary or even advisable. Given the free and open nature of the Internet, and the fact that these pages were designed to be viewed by children, we decided that having some sort of editorial control over the content of the stories was important.

The pages were then revised for the particular needs of the *Parents and Children Together Online* audience, roughly 3,000 visitors a month, 'spiffed up' with background colors and graphics created using a scanner, and sent up via an FTP (File Transfer Protocol) program to the website. This all may sound complicated, but with some small degree of technical assistance from a website manager or educational technology specialist, any Internet-connected classroom teacher should be able to easily design and manage a similar program.

The revamped version of "The Global Campfire" was an immediate and continuing success. We have received contributions from children all over the USA and all over the world--Australia, South Africa, Ireland, to name a few. The magazine as a whole has been awarded Point Communication's *Best 5% of the Web* award, and shares in the ERIC-REC website's *Magellan 4 Star Award* from McKinley Communications, both of these awards no doubt due in part to the interactive collaborative writing forum.

Our plan is to continue to offer "The Global Campfire" as a free service to our readers, and to add new storylines, and multiple storylines to the mix. One of the advantages of hypertext-based systems like the worldwide web is that the reader can have a unique kind control over the text, one that has only been approached, in the printed format, by some children's choose-your-own-adventure books. The growing number of Hypertext Literature, Hyperfiction, or Tree Fiction (all synonyms) sites on the web are growing, (see *http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/users/gdr11/tree-fiction.html* for a listing of resources) and this collaborative writing format should be uniquely interesting and rewarding to young writers. Though the current format of "The Global Campfire" stories is strictly linear, we plan to add this dimension in the coming issues.

In the following pages, an example one of the story trees is represented. As you read through it, keep in mind that the writings are, for the most part, unedited, though small spelling and grammar corrections have been made. I have also included an example of the actual screens students see as they use the site.

The ongoing "Global Campfire" can be viewed at the *Parents and Children Together Online* website:
http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/fl/pcto/menu.html

February 1996

Attachment 1: The introductory screen

Welcome to The Global Campfire!

Since the dawn of time, humans have entertained themselves and each other around the tribal campfire by telling and retelling stories. Some of these stories became legends which live on to this day. From here, you are invited to take part in this ritual that is as old as humanity itself.

YOU can be a part of the next generation of story-tellers, and maybe your story will become a legend too!

You are now standing in front of the Global Campfire. Around you are gathered the many peoples of the world. Each is as unique and different as you are, yet all have gathered in this place for the same reason -- to share in the storytelling.

Each person who comes here has the right to try to add their part to the great Stories of Humanity. Every person can read what the those who have gone before them have written. As part of the Global Community, each person is expected to be respectful of every other person. Everyone's part is as important as everyone else's. Take your turn with dignity, knowing that your story is precious to the world.

The tradition is simple:

- **Read one of the stories that interests you.**
- **Add the next part of the story.**
- **Check back later to see if your contribution has been added to the story.**

Due to the number of submissions received, it is not possible for every submission to be added to every story. You will increase your chances of being a contributor by paying attention to what others have written before you, and making a positive addition to the plotline of the story. Reader contributions will be added to the stories as soon as possible, but there may be a delay of several days, especially on the weekends. Keep checking back!

What is your pleasure today?

- **Read and add onto a story.**
- **Learn about the concept of the Global Campfire**

This story-building project is copyright 1995 by EDINFO Press
Project Developed by Allen Sylvester
Project Coordinated by Christopher Essex
A Special Thanks to the students of Crawford County and Paoli, Indiana,
who have contributed their words to this project.

The Global Campfire: Mystery Story

The House at the End of Fleaker Street

Everyone said that the house at the end of Fleaker Street was haunted, but I had always thought that there were no such things as haunted houses. I decided to find out once and for all what was really going on at the end of Fleaker Street.

My friends and I got a bunch of flashlights, some candles, and our sleeping bags. We were going to spend the night in the old house, and hopefully we'd see what was there. None of us believed in ghosts, so of course we weren't afraid to stay there, but secretly I was afraid.

Submission from Justin
Crawford County

We were camping out at the old house. We did not belive in ghosts, so we thought we had nothing to be afraid of. The house had boards over the windows and doors. We went to the door and pried the board off and opened the old door. It made a loud squeak and it fell of the hinges and we went inside and we heard a loud moaning. My friend said, "Let's put the sleeping bags out." We heard footsteps and a groan and a shadow appeared and it said, "Get out of my house!"

Submission from Naomi
Crawford County

But we decided to stay all night anyway. We heard all kinds of sounds. Then we heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

Submission from Matt
Crawford County

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During the next night we heard noises coming from the upstairs so after a while the noises started getting on our nerves so we decided to go up and find out what the noises were. On our way up we heard voices on the

other side of the upstairs so we hurried up the stairs quickly but quietly. Then when we got to the room right next to the one that had the voices we jumped in that room and hurried up and ran behind the bed so if they decided to go downstairs they wouldn't see us if they looked in the room. We sat in there and listened to the voices for about 5 minutes then we started to here something behind us so we started to look behind us and when we got about half way around we heared someone start screaming and when we turned back around we seen one of our parteners was gone so we ran down stairs as quickly and quietly as we could and when we got down there we...

Submission from Kathryn
New Lambton, South Australia

...were shaking. I could hardly speak. One of us eventually said that we should go and look for our friend. "Was he still alive?". "What were we going to say to his parents?" Slowly we crept around the house looking in each room. We entered the attic and then, "AAAAAAAAhhhhhhhh!" There it was! The biggest one we had ever seen.

Submission from Lisa S.
Johannesburg, South Africa

A monster was staring us. Its ugly jelly like eyes quivered as they took in our appearance. After we had regained pur composure we glanced around the room.

Submission from Brian
Dublin, Ireland

What happened was that our friend had dressed up as the monster and was trying to scare us. He thought it was very funny when he took off his costume. We were angry with him, but...

Submission from Tommy Dorchak
4th grade, West End Catholic School - Johnstown, PA

...then we heard footsteps coming from downstairs. Then we saw something green and leafy coming in our room.
"Ahhhhhhhhhh!" we screamed.
"Hi guys, I brought you a tulip to make this room smell like a room."
"Mom, don't scare us like that!".
But before Mom put the flower down, the tulip opened its two lips.

Submission from Daniel Gibbs
Rideau, Richmond, B.C., Canada

Did you know that tulips have large teeth? Well, neither did we. . .until that day. The teeth were huge and sharp. We stood terrified. Mom was the first one to move. She ran screaming from the room. We would have too, but the tulip cut off our escape. The sound of its grinding teeth made us shudder.
"It's only a flower, what could it possibly do?" my friend asked, with disbelief.
"You're right!" we echoed, "We have nothing to fear."
We relaxed. And we would have stayed relaxed, except for the fact that the flower started to slither towards us!!!!!

Submission from Abbey
Oxford Road Elementary, New Hartford, N.Y.

As the predator plant slithered closer to us, we almost panicked. Bill screamed. "My pocket knife! I just remembered!"
I screamed, "Quick, cut the roots before it reaches us!"

As Bill ran forward, the plant's vines reached out and wrapped around his legs. "Help!" he screamed. Now I did panic.

Submission from Elizabeth
Winfield, Crown Point

"Ahhhhhhhh!" I tried to run, but I couldn't move. Then my friend cut the vine and we all ran downstairs, grabbing our stuff. We ran out the door. But when we got to the porch, we saw a humongous tree blocking our way.

Add on to the story!

Who are you, storyteller?
Please enter your name and your school and city.
Name:
School and City:

When you are done, use the TAB key to move to the SEND button. If you decide not to SEND what you have typed, use the RESET button to erase it.

Remember to SEND your story contribution before you leave!

Press this button to submit the story: SEND.

To reset the form, press this button: Reset

Go back to the campfire